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SUBJECT: H1N1 rises sharply in French Pacific Ocean Territories

¶1. (SBU) New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna have been hit hard by H1N1 in recent weeks, making up the bulk of all French H1N1 related deaths and infections. The two deaths last week in New Caledonia spark concern as neither victim had any known pre-existing medical conditions. Contacts at the French Ministry of Health informed the Embassy that France will be sending an Institute of Public Health (InVS) investigation team to New Caledonia to assess the situation and will advise on findings.

¶2. (U) Incidence of H1N1 rose sharply in all French territories in the Pacific Ocean which are currently experiencing winter and normal flu season. Those hit the hardest include New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna.

New Caledonia: The New Caledonia health authorities estimate 35,000 cumulative cases of H1N1 since the beginning of the epidemic, which is 14 percent of the population. Most infections have been through secondary contact. The southern province and in particular the capital, Noumea, is the earliest and most severely affected. Since the beginning of the epidemic, there have been five deaths including two without known risk factors 2 deaths all since August 17. New Caledonian authorities have downgraded their initial response to an H1N1 potential epidemic, cancelling the policy of closing any school in which a case was reported. The New Caledonia authorities stated that their reasoning was that it had become obvious that H1N1 could not be stopped and to close down whole schools had become "impractical" and "irrelevant." This response was echoed across French Polynesia.

French Polynesia: The French Polynesia health authorities note a sharp increase in H1N1 cases, an estimated 10,000 cases since the beginning of the epidemic, representing eight percent of the population. The five archipelagos and most islands have been affected. Since August 12, three deaths have been reported from individuals with risk factors (two women and an infant.)

Wallis and Futuna: The epidemic is growing quickly in Wallis and Futuna. Individual medical consultations have increased 50 percent from the previous week, four cases were hospitalized. Two thousand cases were noted by local health authorities for the week of 17 August, an incidence of 15 percent of the population. These numbers are underestimated due to the saturation of the healthcare system reported the local health agency. No deaths have been reported.

According to press reports, cruise ships from Australia have triggered scares in the French Pacific territories, after it was discovered that some passengers testing positive for H1N1 had not been quarantined, according to press reports.

¶3. (SBU) It is unknown if the spread of infection is related to the

onset of winter and the normal flu season. The French government is closely monitoring the situation and has sent health officials to New Caledonia and French Polynesia to contain the outbreak, provide medical aid, and seek out lessons learned. An investigation team will be deployed this week to assess the pandemic phenomena in the region. The Embassy remains in contact with the Institute of Public Health (InVS) and will provide situation updates. According to French Health Minister Roselyne Bachelot, what is being seen in these territories could foreshadow what will take place this fall in metropolitan France.

¶4. (U) In metropolitan France the spread of H1N1 remains limited. From 17 to 23 August, the incidence of 28,000 consultations for flu remains below the epidemic threshold.

¶5. (U) Influenza activity continues to increase in Martinique, while decreases in Guadeloupe. On the island of Reunion, influenza activity continues to grow and is well above the maximum activity observed in the same period over the last five years.

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